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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis was investigated that, in a structured interview, older children and children from divorced families would express more complex, abstract, and integrated reasoning about marriage and divorce than younger children and children in intact families. It was further hypothesized that children with divorced parents would reach a more complex understanding of family relationships than children whose parents have not separated. Subjects were 119 children between the ages of 5 and 10 in kindergarten and the second and fourth grades. Children were asked both open- and close-ended questions about five main themes in reference to a story line that was illustrated with paper dolls. Themes were: (1) marriage; (2) divorce of a couple without children; (3) divorce of a couple with young children; (4) remarriage; and (5) stepparents. Children were asked questions on marriage and divorce as social institutions and as personal possibilities and on the benefits, problems, and reasons for these marital situations. Findings indicated that the age of the child, not parents' marital status, predicts children's understanding of marriage and divorce. Older children were more likely to express more concrete and practical, and complex and psychological reasoning, than younger children. Younger children were more likely to focus on obvious, superficial behaviors and appearances of spouses, stepparents, and stepchildren. (RH)

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The Development of Children's Understanding of Marriage and Divorce

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Paper presented at the 20th Annual Symposium of the Jean Piaget Society, Philadelphia, PA, June 1990.

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Diagraming sentences, memorizing the periodic table, years and years of balancing equations, these are all activities which we all know you never do in real life. Children are given all these lessons for the unimportant things. But what about lessons for marriage, or for parenthood? Before you can drive a car, you need a state-approved driver's license, but driving a car is really nothing, nothing compared to living day in and day out with a husband, or a wife, and raising one or two or more children. There is some developmental evidence, going back to Piaget, that children's understanding of the family is quite different from adults'. Do children's family backgrounds and their age influence their understanding of marriage and divorce?

Although a few studies have measured children's attitudes towards marriage and divorce, they had problems of sampling and measurement. It was difficult to conclude from those studies how children of different ages and from different family backgrounds reason about these family issues. For instance, the usual approach to investigating children's ideas about marriage and divorce is to ask children what they think about their <u>parents'</u> divorce, and from these answers to calculate their "divorce adjustment." However, children's attitudes towards marriage and divorce can be seen as a domain of social knowledge that's important in its own right. Because of the salience of the family in children's lives, the study of children's

understanding of it can add significantly to the literature on children's social knowledge.

There's a model of attitude formation, used in alot of sociological research, that children's ideas about marriage and divorce are primarily received knowledge - passed from the adult generation to the younger one like pocket watches. But that model suffers from the fact that American society and a family present many different messages, and children may vary in the way they respond to their diversity and, often, ambiguity. Parents often have vested interests in their children holding to particular views abut family life, to promote grandchildren, for instance, or financial independence. Parents often hide aspects of their marriage to protect their privacy and to "protect the children." Leah's already aware of this strategy, as we can see in her response to the question in my interview, "If you have children, do you think you might ever get divorced?" She replies:

OVERHEAD QUOTE LEAH

"Probably not because..."

Neither does this model of transmission explain children's attempts to understand their own families, such as in Owen's description of his reasoning about his mom and stepfather's relationship:

OVERHEAD QUOTE OWEN

"Well, when my mom got remarried, it was kind of weird"

There's a stronger, alternative explanation, based on a basic principle of social-cognitive developmental theory, that children are <u>active</u> constructors of the world they experience. I do believe that

changes in our culture, such as higher divorce rates and increased career opportunities for women, influence children's attitudes. But there's reason to argue also that there's a pre-existing order to the way children think about social relationships as they mature, which then influences their reactions to social change. This approach, like Piaget's theory of cognitive development, hypothesizes that knowledge is primarily self-constructed and that children interpret their social experiences through a series of developmental stages. Children's ideas about family life involve a variety of age-dependent and active social cognitive skills, especially their understanding of themselves and social relationships, which Robert Selman describes with a series of age-related levels.

HYPOTHESES

The main hypotheses of this study, then, were that in a structured interview, older children and children from divorced families would express more complex, abstract, and integrated reasoning about marriage and divorce than younger children and children with still-married parents. I expected that developmental changes in social-cognitive abilities would influence the extent to which a child's reasoning about family issues was focused on the participants' thoughts, feelings, and intentions, and grounded in an appreciation for the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. I also hypothesized that children with divorced parents would reach a more complex understanding of family relationships than children whose parents have not separated because they would have grappled with parental divorce, trying to make sense of divorce-related changes in their family life.

SAMPLE SIZE OVERHEAD

The subjects in the study were 119 children (ages 5 to 10) in kindergarten, second, and fourth grade. One group lived with nondivorced, still-married parents. Children with divorced parents lived either with single divorced mothers or with remarried mothers and stepfathers in a suburban, midwestern community. The mean length of time since their parents' separation was 4 years 8 months (range 4 mths to 9yrs 9 mths) and it had been 3 years and 3 mnths, on average, since their parents' divorce (range 0 mths to 8.5 yrs). All subjects were white and middle-class, and were students at 4 public elementary schools, where they were interviewed individually.

Children were asked both open and close-ended questions about 5 main themes in reference to a story line that was illustrated with paper dolls.

5 THEMES OVERHEAD

These 5 themes were marriage, divorce of couple without children, divorce of couple with young children, remarriage, and stepparents. The children were asked questions about them as social institutions and as possibilities for themselves, and the benefits, the problems, and the reasons for these marital situations.

The story line introduced the children to these paper dolls:

SUE & ANDY OVERHEAD

Generally, each theme starts with some information about Sue and Andy, then a question about them, then a question about the subject. So the interview starts:

E: I'd like to show you some dolls. This one is Sue and this one is Andy. They're married to each other. What does that mean, to say that they're married?

Then, why do you think Sue and Andy got married?

Can you think of any other reasons why people get married?

And then, do you think you'll ever get married?

Why is that?

A few questions later, the child's reminded that Sue and Andy are married. And is asked, What do you think it's like to be married?

Then, why it (blank)? Or, What's (blank) about it?

Then the interviewer asks a close ended question, such as "When people are married, is it mainly good or is it mainly bad?

What are some good things? What are some bad things?

During the course of the interview, after more discussion of Sue and Andy, we meet Bob who's single, then Jill who's single.

JILL & BOB OVERHEAD

Then Sue & Andy get divorced, and we talk about that. Then the interviewer introduces the subject to their 2 children, by saying,

"Now, let's say that Sue and Andy have these two children," and many of the questions asked earlier about divorce are asked again. Eventually, Sue and Andy each get remarried, so that we can talk about remarriage and then about stepparents for the children.

Transcripts of these interviews were coded by two undergraduates blind to the hypotheses of the study and to the subjects' age, grade, and parents' marital status. Interrater reliability was 93%.

5 THEMES OVERHEAD

Each theme - marriage of S & A, divorce of S & A without children, their divorce with 2 young children, remarriage, and stepparents - was scored separately. For each section, subjects' responses were content analyzed and assigned to one of 6 levels of understanding that best described the subjects' statements. This usually was the average or the modal score. For each child, the total score used as the measure of understanding is the sum of the 5 subscores, for a possible range from 5 to 30.

Explain coding

CODING OVERHEAD

LEVEL 1. **Little or no understanding.** The subject's responses are predominantly "I don't know" or nonsensical. Subject cannot back up responses to close-ended questions with coherent reasons.

LEVEL 2. **The child with superficial observations.** The subject consistently describes marriage and divorce in terms of obvious physical details. The child is concerned with only the easily apparent and obvious behaviors of the dolls and people's

appearances, rather than the motives underlying the behavior. The subject can express feelings ("It's sad" to be divorced) and understands some divorce-related changes ("It's gonna be hard to take care of the two kids.")

a. Child describes a good spouse or stepparent in terms of physical appearance (pretty, they're smiling), in terms of what they own or what they buy the child or spouse (toys), or in ways typically unrelated to marriage (play tennis, or "He could be an engineer like my dad).

b. Privileges of being married are those of being an adult (you can get a dog.)

LEVEL 3. **Transition level between Levels 2 and 4.** The subject's responses sometimes show concrete Level 4 understanding and sometimes Level 2 reasoning. This child has the capability of understanding evident at the higher stage, but has not fully mastered them and applies them inconsistently.

LEVEL 4. **The practical child.** The subject consistently shows concrete understanding, and responses can often be described as practical. The child is often concerned about everyday activities, such as fighting, earning money, doing chores, raising children, and getting things done. The subject can thoughtfully name some good and bad consequences of marital situations.

a. More likely to mention that divorce and marriage, having stepparents, is different depending on the people involved. (Depends on the person).

LEVEL 5. **Transition level between Levels 4 and 6.** The child's reasoning sometimes is psychological Level 6, focusing on people's thoughts, emotions, and intentions. However, about half of the subject's responses can be described as Level 4.

LEVEL 6: **The child as mini-psychologist.** This subject is consistently able to take the perspective of child and spouse, is relatively aware of some things that can happen in a marriage and divorce, and has perceptive, abstract, and psychological responses.

a. Spouses and children are described in terms of how they feel about each other. In good relationships, they understand one another, support each other, share their thoughts and feelings, help each other work out problems, and try to avoid causing each other distress.

b. Subject realizes difficulties in forming and maintaining marriages and stepparent-child relationships, and typically understands that communication is important.

DATA

TABLE ANOVA

1. Repeated measures ANOVA of grade and marital status:
   a. main effect for grade (<u>see Table</u>)
      <u>Corr.</u> between age and level
   b. no effect for parents' marital status

c. main effect for measures, $p<.001$, (marriage had the lowest average - 3.15; stepparents the highest - 3.44).

d. no interactions

e. (main effect for gender ($p<.02$), no interactions: girls=3.42; boys=3.14.)

So it seems, then, that at least in this sample of 5 to 10-year-olds, the age of the child, rather than parents' marital status, predicts children's understanding of marriage and divorce. Older children were more likely to express more concrete and practical, and complex and psychological reasoning than younger children. Younger children were more likely to focus on obvious, superficial behaviors and appearances of spouses, stepparents, and stepchildren.

Conclusion

It is likely that developmental changes in social-cognitive skills, such as perspective-taking, role-playing, and forming causal attributions, as well as the ability to think using concrete and formal operations, influence children's ability to reason about family issues. These developmental changes allow older children to appreciate to some extent the dynamics of marital and other family relationships. These results are consistent with studies reported in the social cognition literature about developmental differences in reasoning about other content areas, such as morality, leadership, and friendship, and as well as in children's descriptions of others. The data do not support the hypothesis that children in these grades who have experienced their parents' divorce reach a more complex understanding about marriage and divorce than children whose parents

have not separated, at least for this sample of children. These results corroborate Robert Selman's theory that children are unlikely to integrate new information and, instead, ignore it when their social cognitive abilities are too immature.

If you have children, do you think you might ever get divorced?

Probably not because it'll be all right for the children. So they won't know what's going on and they'll probably ask and we probably won't tell them because when we grow up we want them to have a happy life, not like us.

Leah, age 10 years 0 months. Mother remarried.

Were those things you had ever thought about before?

Well, when my mom got remarried, it was kind of weird because I thought that my mom and..., cause they lived with each other for a long time, and they knew each other for a long time. So I thought that they were married because I was real young. I thought they were getting like this marrying thing again. I thought like that they had it every year, like you give toys to each other at Christmas.

Owen, age 9 years, 11 months. Mother remarried.

Sample Size

	PARENTS STILL MARRIED	PARENTS DIVORCED
Kindergarten: M = 5 yrs. 9 mths.	28	5
Second Grade: M = 7 yrs. 8 mths.	32	13
Fourth Grade: M = 9 yrs. 8 mths.	27	14
Total N = 119	87	32

For girls, n = 65; for boys, n = 54

5 themes of the interview:

* Marriage
* Divorce without children
* Divorce with children
* Remarriage
* Stepparents

Levels of Understanding of Marriage and Divorce

LEVEL 1. **Little or no understanding.**

LEVEL 2. **The child with superficial observations.**
- To be a good wife, Sue should "go fishing alot and buy lots and lots of apples."
- It's good to be married because "you get to stay up late and watch TV whenever you want to."

LEVEL 3. **Transition level between Levels 2 and 4.**

LEVEL 4. **The practical child.**
- To be a good husband, Andy can "sometimes offer to cook the dinner or offer to go shopping for the mom".
- Divorce can be good because "sometimes you can do more things than if you are married because if you have kids like my brother, you can never get anything done."

LEVEL 5. **Transition level between Levels 4 and 6.**

LEVEL 6. **The child as mini-psychologist.**
- A good husband is "someone who cares about you just the way you are and doesn't want you to change."
- Remarriage can be bad because "sometimes you can't stop the things that happened in your last marriage. I mean, they might just, well, come up behind you and say 'Boo!', and then happen all over again."

Table 2

ANOVA of Level of Understanding

GRADE	N	MEAN
K	33	12 (2.5)
2ND	45	17 (3.3)
4TH	41	20 (4.0)

$p<.001$

$\underline{R} = .66$, $\underline{p}<.001$